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TAGS: PHUM PGOV KZ POLITICAL

SUBJECT: KAZAKHSTAN: FRACTURED OPPOSITION ATTEMPTS TO
UNITE FOR PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

REF: A. ALMATY 746

1B. ALMATY 582

Classified By: Ambassador John Ordway, reasons 1.4 (B) and (D).

11. (C) Summary: Against the backdrop of the liquidation of Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan and a split in Ak Zhol, the majority of the Kazakhstani opposition has united around former Mazhilis speaker Zharmakhan Tuyakbay as their presidential candidate. The parties have formed an electoral bloc entitled "For a Just Kazakhstan" to participate in the next presidential elections. However, Ak Zhol co-chair Alikhan Baimenov did not participate. Some opposition figures claim that Baimenov has been co-opted by the authorities to set the scene for a three-way contest in which the opposition vote will be divided. End summary.

The Opposition Unites

12. (SBU) On March 20, representatives of the opposition selected former Speaker of the Parliament Zharmakhan Tuyakbay as their candidate for the presidency and voted to create an electoral bloc entitled "For a Just Kazakhstan" (FJK). The only members of the opposition not present at the meeting, which brought together approximately 590 delegates from around the country, were Ak Zhol co-chair Alikhan Baimenov and his supporters. Delegates elected a 19-member presidium that included Tuyakbay and representatives of Ak Zhol (Bulat Abilov, Oraz Zhandosov, Altynbek Sarsenbailuly), both factions of Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan (Galymzhan Zhakiyanov, Petr Svoik, Zauresh Battalova, Assylbek Kozhakhmetov), and the Communist Party of Kazakhstan (Serikbolsyn Abdildin, Tulen Tokhtasynov). Controversial opposition figure Zamanbek Nurkadilov was also elected to the presidium. Delegates also approved a 57-member council, which includes exiled former Kazakhstani PM Akezhan Kazhegeldin.

13. (SBU) The standing room-only gathering took place early on Sunday morning in an Almaty movie theater, decorated for the occasion with an enormous "For a Just Kazakhstan" banner. Delegates were primarily middle-aged or older, with only about 10% young people. The crowd was surprisingly energized, breaking into frequent chants of "Nazarbayev ket" ("Down with Nazarbayev") and "Zharmakhan" (Tuyakbay's first name). Abdildin, who frequently presides at opposition events due to his seniority, called the meeting to order. Abilov then briefly described the purpose of the event and announced the members of the presidium. He also introduced foreign guests, including a Kyrgyz opposition leader and the head of the "Pora" movement in Ukraine. Tuyakbay gave the first speech -- a rather uninspiring but eloquent overview of the challenges facing the country, including corruption and poverty, and the need for the opposition to unite. He cited the adoption of a new Constitution based on the Opposition Coordination Council's draft as a priority, and spoke of the need to overcome civic apathy.

14. (SBU) Although DCK leader Galymzhan Zhakiyanov could not be present at the gathering, as he is not permitted to leave his settlement colony in Shiderty, he was given the honor of being the first to announce that Tuyakbay would be the opposition presidential candidate. In a letter read aloud by Abilov, Zhakiyanov outlined the characteristics necessary for a successful candidacy and declared that Tuyakbay was the best person for the job. Subsequent speakers echoed their support for Tuyakbay and stressed the need for unity in the fact of GOK repression tactics. A representative of Kazhegeldin announced that the former PM, now living in London, would support the opposition's candidate with "all of his ability and resources," noting that it would be the state's fault if the opposition was "forced into the streets."

15. (SBU) A declaration adopted by the delegates called for presidential elections to be conducted in an honest and transparent manner, in accordance with the Constitution. FJK leaders believe that presidential elections should be held in December 2005, as Nazarbayev was elected to a 7-year term in January 1999. (Note: Through a rather tortured

interpretation of the constitution, the GOK has consistently insisted that elections cannot be held until December 2006.) Several speakers underscored the fact that FJK is a peaceful movement that seeks to work within the Kazakhstani political system for change. Almost all made references to the recent upheavals in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan.

But the Parties Splinter

16. (C) After the liquidation of DCK (ref A), the left wing of the opposition remains fractured. Zhakiyanov's supporters are still at odds with the Ablyazov/Kozhakhmetov camp, which they view as having intentionally provoked a conflict with the GOK. There have been indications from the GOK, including public statements by Security Council chair Utemuratov and Mazhilis speaker Mukhamedzhanov (and categorical private assurances to the Ambassador by Utemuratov), that a compromise might be possible if DCK would renounce the objectionable portions of its December 11 statement. Zhakiyanov confidant Tulen Tokhtasynov told POEC chief that DCK leaders have not been able to come to agreement among themselves, however, leaving the party in limbo pending the next appeal verdict.

17. (C) Tensions within Ak Zhol (ref B) have led to a split in that party as well. The fundamental area of disagreement was ostensibly co-chair Alikhan Baimenov's unwillingness to work with the "radical opposition" through the Opposition Coordination Council. After trading a series of combative public statements with the other co-chairs, Baimenov conducted a party congress in Astana on March 13 at which he was elected the sole chairman. All supporters of Abilov, Zhandosov, and Sarsenbailuly were kicked out of the party's presidium and central committee. The change in leadership will require Baimenov and his supporters to seek re-registration.

18. (C) Abilov and Zhandosov told POEC chief on March 16 that they considered the Astana congress to have been illegitimate, and would challenge Baimenov's actions in court. They were pessimistic about the chances of success, however, as they claimed that the GOK had been actively supporting Baimenov's grab for control. They said that local authorities had helped organize the regional meetings that selected delegates for the Astana congress, and that representatives of the KNB had called Ak Zhol members to pressure them to attend the Astana congress instead of a competing meeting in Almaty. They also noted that the state-controlled media are treating Baimenov's faction as the legitimate Ak Zhol, and are not covering the meetings and announcements of their faction. (Note: We saw no coverage in the press of a March 15 press conference in Almaty organized by the Abilov-Zhandosov-Sarsenbailuly faction. The split has also resulted in the closure of the party's website and the "Ak Zhol - Kazakhstan" newspaper, further hindering their ability to get their message across. End note.)

19. (C) Zhandosov told POEC chief that absent GOK interference, the disagreement with Baimenov could have been resolved through normal intra-party discussions. It became clear, however, that Baimenov had chosen to work with the government rather than remain within the opposition. Numerous observers of Kazakhstani politics have speculated that Baimenov, always the most moderate of the five co-chairs, is closely linked to the GOK. Tokhtasynov told POEC chief on February 23 that he had always doubted Baimenov's sincerity, and was now convinced that Baimenov was working for the government to splinter the opposition. Zhandosov and Abilov stressed that the government's interference in Ak Zhol was part of a broader campaign to clear the field for December 2005 presidential elections; repeated official statements that the elections would take place in 2006 were simply a disinformation campaign intended to keep the public and the opposition confused. They expressed confidence that the majority of Ak Zhol members would go with them rather than Baimenov. (Comment: Perceptions of GOK interference may be true, but the primary reasons for the split rest within the party itself. Utemuratov and several other senior presidential aides have heatedly denied to the Ambassador that they have any involvement in the Ak Zhol split. End comment.)

Comment

10. (C) Comment: The degree of unity and enthusiasm for Tuyakbay's candidacy displayed at the March 20 opposition meeting was surprising and perhaps unprecedented for Kazakhstan -- although there remains the daunting challenge of maintaining unity in a very diverse group for nine (or more likely 21) more months. The fact that one main opposition party has been liquidated and another has split

will greatly hinder the opposition's ability to campaign effectively, raise funds, and get a unified message across. The opposition's major problem, however, is President Nazarbayev's deep and broad popularity. Baimenov's potential candidacy is another challenge, since he is thought to be more popular in the regions than other opposition figures and

could split what at the moment appears to be a minority opposition electorate. End comment.
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